**Divide and rule**

BY A A S I M S A JJ A D A K H T A R | 10/4/2019

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| FOR all that is wrong in Pakistan today, there is still hope in the form of those in this 220 million-strong country who have always stood with the poor, oppressed nations and religious communities, women and girls; those who speak truth to power at great danger to themselves; those who are not fearful of going against the grain and challenging obsolete social norms, knowing that one day in the future such ideas will become widely accepted.  When the 150th birth anniversary of Mohandas Gandhi was commemorated earlier this week, I was reminded that it was only seven decades ago that virtually all of the subcontinent`s people which in 1947 was a number close to 400m actually shared the above ideals, and broadly supported the movement for national liberation, in the hope that we would together build a society free in injustice and inequality.  Yet even as most of British India`s ordinary people shared the desire to be free, we were divided. So we rid ourselves of the Raj, but created separate countries that have been at loggerheads ever since. Both the Indian and Pakistani establishments continue to happily exploit narrow nationalist ideologies to sustain their power and history is so easily rewritten by the powerful that today we are even witness to the absurd spectacle of RSS-inspired Narendra Modi claiming to be the heir to Gandhi! But how to deal with the challenge of Modi and the BJP in India is for our friends across the border to sort out. Let me come back to Pakistan: this country has had no shortage of committed patriots who have tried to build an egalitarian and just society, defying exclusionary state nationalist narratives, and, as noted in an editorial earlier this week, despite rhetoric declaring them traitors. The question that such committed patriots of the people must answer is: why haven`t we succeeded in our quest to overturn such an unjust and inegalitarian order? Why is an authoritarian and antipeople state still able to project itself as representative ofthe people? At least part of the answer is that the state uses coercion and manipulates the means of information in society to maintain a hegemonic social order. We, on the other hand, neither want to use coercive methods to `win` nor can easily challenge the dominant narratives because we do not control the means of information (corporate media, educational institutions, places of religious worship, etc).  We who want genuine change (not tabdeeli sarkar variety) thus spend most of our energies challenging the state and dominant elites` coercive methods as well as the dominant narratives that they peddle. Wedo so through the pen, by speaking out, via artistic expression, and so on more and more on social media platforms.  However, as Tooba Syed pointed out recently on these pages, too often these efforts are equivalent to firefighting and do not coalesce around a shared long-term vision for change, while our methods often reinforce established social norms. Hence our brave voices are never muted, but they rarely end up amounting to more than a cacophony.  So the other part of the answer to why we don`t succeed in our quest to overturn systemic domination is that we are ourselves divided. Harken back to the end of British rule; we succeeded in getting ride of formal colonialism, but we failed to bring together all of the wretched of the earth and genuinely liberate society from the political, economic and cultural foundations of colonial rule.  Another way of understanding the quandary is that the divide-and-rule strategy of the British Raj has continued to be successful in the post-colonial period. But this means allthe more that we those who speak for the wretched of the earth have a greater responsibility than ever to sort ourselves out and break the cycle.  This is easier said than done, in part because while we share an opposition to injustice andinequality (read: the symptoms), we may not necessarily agree on their systemic underpinnings (read: the causes). So, for example, is the dominant system we want to challenge capitalism, patriarchy, ethnic majoritarianism, or even just military hegemony? Relatedly, we do not necessarily all agree on what we want to replace the dominant system with. Even if we can agree on something as banal as `democracy`, does this mean the same thing to all of us? In my understanding, we who struggle for ethnic equality, women`s liberation, democracy, or even revolution have a responsibility to ensure that we don`t engage in unproductive battles amongst ourselves. The rise of right-wing populists in India, Pakistan, and indeed around the world demands that we bridge our differences and rehabilitate the idea that the wretched of the earth can indeed all be liberated. Else our claims to being more revolutionary than one another will never go beyond our own echo chambers. The writer teaches at Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad. |  |